

## Portion Sizes and School-Age Children

# Sample Feature Article

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### Giving Children Large Portion Sizes May Lead to Overeating

Have you ever walked into a donut shop to get a half dozen donuts, only to be told that you could get the whole dozen for the same price? What would you do? Many consumers would opt for the dozen, because they are shopping for value. What they do not realize is that they are actually buying health problems for themselves and their families. Today's children eat out often and are coaxed through attractive advertising to order "supersizes" or "supervalues." This practice of providing children with more food than is necessary is one factor that is contributing to obesity.

The number of children who are considered overweight or obese is increasing just like the number of adults. Researchers believe many factors may be causing this in children, including the availability of high-calorie snacks, too much time spent watching television, fewer opportunities for physical education in schools, and easy access to fast foods and their "supervalue" portion sizes. A recent study has shown that children as young as five years of age eat more food when offered larger portion sizes than when offered "normal" portion sizes.

Scientists at the Pennsylvania State University studied how portion sizes influenced the amount of food that 3-year-old and 5-year-old preschoolers ate for lunch. The researchers fed the children the same meal once a week for three weeks. Each week they served portion sizes that were equal to, smaller than or larger than current USDA recommendations for 3-year-olds and 5-year olds.

They found that the older children ate more food and more total calories when they were served the large portions. In contrast, the 3-year-olds were not influenced by portion sizes, eating the same amount of food on each occasion. Other studies in adults have shown similar results. The researchers concluded this indicates that while younger children still eat in response to hunger and stop eating when they are full, by five years of age children's food intake may be more influenced by environmental factors instead of physical needs. This is a big concern since a habit of eating more when larger portions are available may lead to overweight or obesity in children and adults.

The researchers stated that it is important for parents and care givers to guide young children into good eating habits to reduce their risk of becoming overweight. Parents and care givers can teach young children healthy eating habits by being a role model of a healthy eater, making a variety of foods available at meals and snacks and allowing children to learn how to regulate how much they eat when hungry. It is also important to know that encouraging children to "clean their plates" or offering food as rewards can lead children to overeat or eat in response to environmental factors and not in response to hunger and needs. However, it is encouraging to know that when children are offered a balanced diet on a regular basis they can develop lasting healthful eating habits.

The USDA Food Guide Pyramid for Young Children (2-6-year olds) is a good tool to learn about the foods and serving sizes recommended for young children. The Guide recommends that young children eat a variety of foods that include six grain servings such as bread, cereal, rice, or noodles, three vegetable and two fruit servings, two meat/protein servings such as lean chicken or meat, beans or nuts, and two milk servings such as low-fat milk, yogurt or cheese. Serving sizes vary based on the age of the child. As a general rule, start with one tablespoon of cereal or grain, fruit, vegetable or meat per year of age. Milk servings are one cup for all ages, but these can be offered in smaller amounts throughout the day to meet the total. These suggestions are starting points and may need adjusting to meet individual needs. You can view and read more about the Guide at <http://www.usda.gov/cnpp/KidsPyra/PyrBook.pdf>.

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